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Barreras que conducen a la desvinculación en la trayectoria deportiva: un análisis fenomenológico interpretativo con futbolistas de élite retiradas

Barriers to disengagement from an athletic career: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis with retired elite-level female footballers

Obstáculos ao desinvestimento na carreira atlética: Uma análise fenomenológica interpretativa com ex-jogadoras de futebol de elite

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RESUMEN

En el contexto de la práctica deportiva, tan pronto como se pasa el período ideal para alcanzar ciertas metas y la inversión en una meta ya no es alcanzable, la desinversión en una determinada meta bloqueada y la reinversión en metas alternativas contribuirán a un desarrollo adaptativo, como argumentan las teorías de autorregulación. El objetivo del presente estudio fue explorar las barreras experimentadas por cuatro ex jugadoras de fútbol de élite durante su período de adaptación a largo plazo. En este sentido, el presente estudio se desarrolló de acuerdo con los principios del análisis fenomenológico interpretativo. Los resultados sugieren que los ex deportistas tuvieron dificultades para desprenderse de sus objetivos profesionales durante la transición a la retirada del deporte, habiendo enumerado cuatro razones: i) el miedo a ser olvidados; ii) el intento de crear un vínculo para una futura implicación como futuras entrenadoras; iii) la creencia de que como practicantes disfrutaban de un rol muy gratificante; iv) la presión social para seguir practicando a un nivel deportivo de élite. Estos resultados muestran que con el acercamiento de la edad de retiro, las atletas pueden beneficiarse de intervenciones psicológicas que ayuden a esta transición de carrera.

Palabras clave: transición de carrera; fútbol; autorregulación; ex atletas; remodelación; desinversión de carrera

ABSTRACT

Once the optimal age for achieving certain goals has passed and the investment in a goal is no longer possible, self-regulation theories claim that disengagement from the goal and re-engagement in alternative goals will contribute to adaptive development. The present study explored the barriers experienced by four retired female elite-level footballers when adapting to retirement in the long term. To achieve this, the study was designed according to the principles of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. Our findings suggest that the ex-athletes found it difficult to disengage from their career goals during their transitions out of elite sport and listed four main reasons for this: i) the fear of being forgotten; ii) the attempt to create a link for future involvement as future coaches; iii) the belief that as practitioners they enjoy a very rewarding role in terms of achievement; iv) the social pressure to continue practicing at an elite sporting level. These findings suggest athletes approaching retirement might benefit from support interventions to help prevent distress and to promote well-being during their transitions out of elite sport. Therefore, clubs and federations should encourage and foster the development of adequate career transition programs, to achieve a fairer environment and a better quality of life for the players.

Keywords: career transitions; football; self-regulation; ex-athletes; retirement from sport; career disengagement

RESUMO

No contexto da prática desportiva, assim que o período ideal para que os praticantes alcancem determinadas metas é ultrapassado e o investimento em um objetivo já não é passível de ser alcançado, o desinvestimento em determinado objetivo bloqueado e o reinvestimento em objetivos alternativos poderá contribuir para um desenvolvimento adaptativo, conforme sustentam as teorias da autorregulação. O presente estudo teve como propósito explorar as principais barreiras experienciadas por quatro ex-atletas de futebol de elite durante o seu período de adaptação a longo prazo. Para tal recorreu-se aos princípios da análise fenomenológica interpretativa. Os resultados sugerem que as ex-atletas apresentaram dificuldades em desinvestir dos objetivos de carreira durante a transição para a reforma da prática desportiva, tendo para tal elencado quatro razões principais: i) o medo de serem esquecidas; ii) a tentativa de criarem uma ligação para um futuro envolvimento enquanto futuras treinadoras; iii) a crença de que enquanto praticantes usufruem de um papel deveras gratificante em termos de realização; iv) a pressão social para continuarem a praticar ao nível do desporto de elite. Os resultados encontrados sugerem que, com a aproximação da idade da reforma, as atletas podem beneficiar de intervenções psicológicas que facilitem a transição de carreira e previnam elevados níveis de stresse, promovendo-se o bem-estar durante a respetiva transição. Deste modo, afigura-se recomendável que tanto clubes como federações encorajem e fomentem o desenvolvimento de programas adequados de transição de carreira, em nome de um mais justo enquadramento e de uma melhor qualidade de vida dos praticantes desportivos.

Palavras chave: transição de carreira; futebol; auto-regulação; ex-atletas; reforma; desinvestimento na carreira

INTRODUCTION

Critical life transitions, including the termination of one's career and transition into retirement, reflect particularly challenging periods in which there may be a need to adjust personal goals (e.g., the Motivational Theory of Life-Span Development; Heckhausen et al., 2010). Athletes often find it particularly challenging to adjust and transition into retirement (Mannes et al., 2019). Self-regulation

theories claim that an adaptive transition life transition (e.g., retirement or maternity, Suárez et al., 2022) depends on our ability to disengage from past career goals and to reengage in new life goals (Heckhausen et al., 2010).

Research on athletes' adjustment to retirement is burgeoning, with numerous reviews on the topic already presented (e.g., Barth et al., 2021). From this

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past work, it is clear athletes can experience mental (Cosh et al., 2013; Fossati et al., 2021; Mannes et al., 2019), physical, and social (Brown et al., 2019) barriers after retirement. Clear distinctions remain in the literature between those who decide they want to retire, and those forced to retire due to injury (Kaul, 2017). For those who experience retirement due to injury, social support, and appreciation for different aspects of their life help facilitate growth and a positive transition out of sport (Vann et al., 2019). Still, the distress present for athletes when forced to retire due to injury also places them at risk for distressing behaviors. For example, athletes have reported feeling overwhelmed by negative thoughts related to themselves after involuntary retirement (Kaul, 2017), and others report using alcohol to cope with their career-ending injuries (Vann et al., 2019). While plenty of athletes choose to retire without a direct link to a physical injury inhibiting them from their sports career, such athletes may still find the transition away from elite sport distressing. Compounding this issue, the stigma attached to mental health issues remains a barrier to athletes seeking help when they need it (Castaldelli-Maia et al., 2019).

An athlete's readiness to conclude their career, their self-assessment of career accomplishments, prior experiences with non-career transitions, support from peers and family, and the strength of athletic identity all play a role in shaping the nature and quality of barriers encountered during a career transition (Brown et al., 2019; Cosh et al., 2013; Filbay et al., 2019; Furie et al., 2023; Schmid et al., 2023; Shander & Petrie, 2021; Wylleman et al., 2004). For example, a review study by Smith and McManus (2009) suggests that a stronger athletic identity leads to more substantial commitment, but also more difficulty during the career transition. Previous research has also shown that difficulty in planning retirement in advance makes it harder for athletes to disengage from their careers during the transition phase to retirement: athletes felt they needed to stay focused on their performance until the final day of their career (D'Angelo et al., 2017).

Past studies on the retirement process of elite athletes indicate that certain behaviors indicative of reengagement may be beneficial for facing barriers and having an adaptive adjustment. For example, a

study of ex-Olympic athletes showed that some women responded adaptively to their retirement by finding full-time jobs (Stephan et al., 2003). That said, the same study reported that the athletes generally struggled to adjust to their new lifestyle.

Given this body of evidence, it is clear there remains a need to understand adjustment after the retirement phase period to reassure that athletes can maintain their adaptation long-term, particularly given the high risk for adverse mental health outcomes post-retirement (Cosh et al., 2013; Mannes et al., 2019). Most past studies on retirement have focused on the transition period between the first month and up to one year after retirement (Brown et al., 2018; Stephan et al., 2003), meaning more follow-up studies are required to explore long-term adjustment. Moreover, previous research on athletes' perspectives relies heavily on male athletes (Smith & Ntoumanis, 2014). Therefore, there remains a need to continue to represent female athletes in the literature.

The current qualitative research will contribute to the existing literature by including and focusing on female athletes and investigating factors that can affect ex-athlete's self-regulation after retirement. The researchers aimed to analyze Portuguese female football athletes' perspectives on what type of barriers they faced when disengaging from their careers and re-engaging in alternative life goals in the years after retiring. Additionally, the researchers explore the barriers experienced by ex-athletes to disengage from their career goals and re-engage in other life goals in the long term. Finally, the research's impact and importance are related to its value for the development of psychological interventions that can help athletes develop regulatory strategies that can help them deal with this complicated transition period in their life.

METHOD

Research Design Overview

The present study, designed following guidelines for Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), has a qualitative methodological approach based on a phenomenological perspective. IPA assumes that meaning is central, and that the researcher should develop a relationship with the interview transcript, based on in-depth interpretation and reflection, to

understand participants' beliefs based on their speech (Smith et al., 2009). This deep level of analysis is only possible if the researcher tries to assess "the content and complexity of those meanings rather than measure their frequency" (p.66, Smith et al., 2009). Thus, IPA allows for an in-depth analysis of the participants' perspectives. IPA also allows the researcher to capture the specificity of a given cultural practice related to age, gender, and particular life transitions (Heidegger, 1962) concerning the meaning-making a person experiences in a particular phase of life (e.g., when retiring from a sports career). The method allows for depth of analysis is the inclusion of the double-hermeneutic interpretation process (Smith et al., 2009). The double-hermeneutic interpretation process involves understanding a person's unique personal experience to gain knowledge of the broader collective and structural or outside factors that impact their experience (Pitre et al., 2013). The combination of these methods allows for a deep understanding and interpretation of a person's story. Due to this interpretative nature of the methodology, IPA aims to develop a detailed examination of participants' perceptions by performing a detailed and reflective case-by-case type of analysis for each participant and not by making general assumptions (Smith et al., 2009). Therefore, IPA studies are performed with a small sample size with the average advisable number concerning the nature of the analysis being three participants to capture homogeneity and allow for a better understanding of similar lived experiences (Smith et al., 2009). This type of analysis has already been used in previous studies into health and developmental challenges (e.g., MacLeod, 2019).

The in-depth nature of these methods also allows for a smaller sample of individuals to be examined. The guidelines of Yardley (2007) were followed to ensure the quality of the study. These guidelines help assess the study's quality flexibly and holistically (Smith et al., 2009) and include four main dimensions: sensitivity to context, commitment and rigor, transparency and coherence, and impact and importance of the research.

Study Participants

In total, four former female footballers who began their careers as teenagers, and ended their careers in their 30s or 40s, participated in the study. These women all participated in semi-professional football

for at least 16 years. Ten years of practice is the period considered necessary for an individual to become an expert in a sport. The characteristics of these four participants, along with pseudonyms, are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Study participants.

Pseudonym	Age	Length of career (years)	Level achieved	Years since retirement
Mary	36	16	National Team level	2
Charlotte	40	20	Club level	2.5
Kate	36	16	National Team level	2
Sue	38	18	Club level	2.5

Participant Recruitment

Recruitment began after obtaining ethical approval from the Institutional Review Board of Ball State University (reference: 1126133-1), ensuring the study adhered to the ethical standards outlined in Sport Sciences and Exercise Research (Harriss et al., 2022), as well as the principles set forth in the Declaration of Helsinki concerning research involving human subjects (World Medical Association, 2013). In accordance with these guidelines, participants willingly agreed to participate in the study by providing written informed consent.

The researchers used a referral sampling method to recruit participants. Specifically, the lead author contacted three football coaches in Portugal and requested if they (the coaches) could introduce the study to former athletes. Athletes accepting the invitation to participate were asked to provide an email address and telephone number so they could be contacted by the research team. An email was then sent to athletes by one of the researchers to set a date and time for the interview.

Materials

Interview Guide

The interview guide was initially drafted in English by one researcher and subsequently translated into Portuguese by another researcher. The participants were asked a total of twelve questions. The interview protocol covered the following topics: (1) career length, (2) influences throughout the athletic career, (3) level of family support, (4) transition out of sport,

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(5) old sport goals, (6) outcomes of those goals, and (7) new goals.

Data Collection

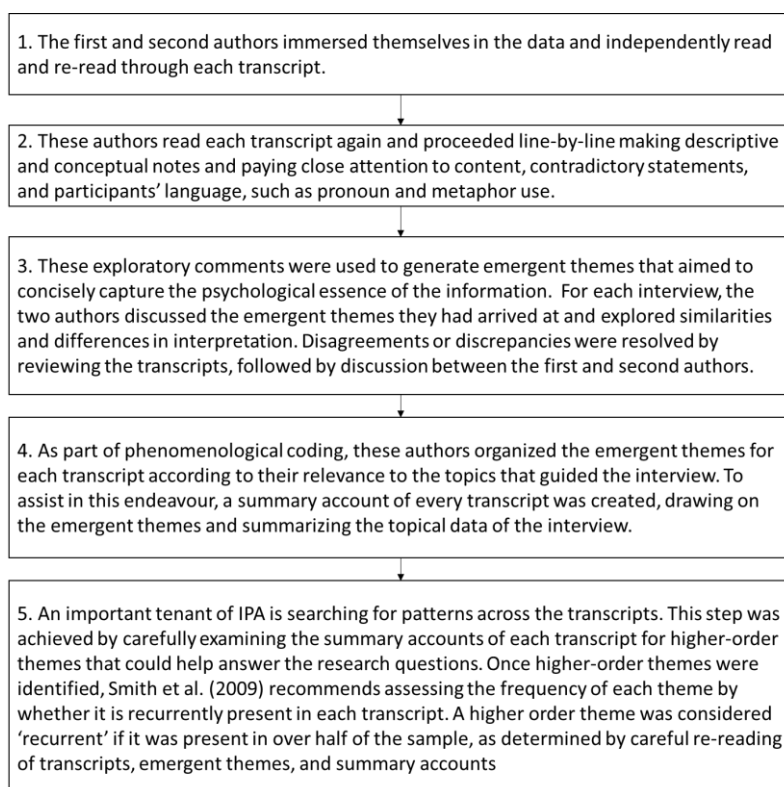
Interviews

The study involved conducting a single, comprehensive 45-minute interview with each of the four athletes, with the first author [anonymized], a native Portuguese speaker, serving as the interviewer. All interviews occurred face-to-face and were recorded and transcribed verbatim in both English and Portuguese. To ensure confidentiality, the interview recordings, and transcripts, omitting participants' names, were stored in separate folders on a secure web storage database.

Analysis

Figure 1

Description of the coding process.



Methodological Integrity

To ensure the quality and methodological rigor of the present study we followed recommended guidelines for makers of quality: (a) worthy topic, (b) rich rigor,

Data-analytic Strategies

The analysis adhered to the various stages outlined in the IPA framework (Smith et al., 2009), encompassing five key steps. Figure 1 presents a detailed description of these steps. Discussion between the authors and reflective journaling throughout the analytical process played a crucial role in comprehending the participant's perspectives of their own experiences, known as double hermeneutics (Smith et al., 2009). Concordance agreement (Anguera, 1990) between the authors was achieved following Smith's IPA guidelines to create the higher-order themes. This process will be explained below in number 5 of the description of the coding process.

(c) sincerity, (d) credibility, (e) resonance, (f) significant contribution, (g) ethics, and (h) meaningful coherence (Tracy, 2010).

In a time when the participation of women in sports is high on the research agenda due to their high rates

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of drop-out and misrepresentation, the topic is relevant. In terms of rigor, we followed Smith's guidelines (2009) to conduct IPA. At the same time, to establish rigor when describing the themes, we ensured that enough space of given to each one of them, allowing for an interpretative and not just descriptive of the extracts and respecting the convergence and divergent patterns of the data.

According to IPA, researchers are the instruments through which data are transmitted and interpreted. Concerning sensitivity to context, the principal researcher S.M. is a sports psychologist who works in football with frequent (daily) contact with retired athletes. S.M. kept a research diary to register all phases of the study to discuss it with the other researchers and clarify the research process to the reader. Regarding the credibility of the main themes, this dimension was enhanced by revising the interview transcriptions between researchers during all stages of data analysis. Disagreements were solved by promoting constructive and recurrent dialogue about the themes. Transparency and coherence were addressed by using another expert researcher in the sports psychology field to revise the methodology and the decisions made in the different research study stages. We also followed the American Psychological Association's Compliance Checklist (2020) to ensure that the main principles of confidentiality and privacy were met. Finally, the link between the theoretical models presented in the introduction section, the research questions, and the interpretation of results indicate the existence of meaningful coherence.

RESULTS

Our analysis of the players' interviews revealed four high-order themes, each describing a distinct type of barrier to disengagement from the athletic career after retirement: (1) fear of being forgotten, (2) continued involvement in sport as a coach, (3) beliefs that being an athlete was uniquely fulfilling, and (4) social pressure to continue in elite sport.

Fear of Being Forgotten

When asked about potential barriers that could compromise retiring, two of the four ex-athletes referred to their concerns about not having a legacy in sport. Sue described how one of the main barriers to disengaging from the athletic career was related to

the difficulty of losing recognition from other people. This recognition seemed also to be linked with a feeling of losing several things such as a loss of identity:

All the social recognition that you have as a player can end...and it is hard to lose that recognition from other people...mostly because players' careers are quite short...and when you are making the decision to finish your career you always feel afraid of being forgotten.

It was clear that this remained an issue for Sue, despite being retired for more than two years:

Emotionally I had to overcome a lot... it was the end of several things... (...) I think that people still recognize me... but I think we are still afraid that people will forget us.

Mary, who had been retired for two years after an international-level career, gave some insights into how she dealt with not being forgotten:

All the prizes that I got mean that what you did in your career will last...and that can only make you proud and I do not think I am better than no one else but I left my contribution...and like that I will possibly be linked to football forever.

While the women expressed fear of being forgotten, they were often describing a more profound sense of loss in their lives: a loss of whom they felt they were concerning their job (i.e. identity). Generally, the athletes agreed their lives were made better by their sport, but it was essential to feel that they had reached their potential and left a legacy. For example, Kate mentioned:

I wanted to leave football feeling I had left a good impression.

Becoming a Coach to Avoid the End

For some of the ex-athletes, the decision to transition away from elite sport was difficult but also seemed like the most logical next step in their career.

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The women reported that the transition from athlete to coach helped them cope with their fears of being forgotten and to avoid the confrontation with the feelings of being 'done' with their athletic career. Sue revealed that remaining in the football field helped her transition to retirement:

The decision to remain in the field did not seem to completely fill the void of not being a player. Sue continued:

...well... it never is... really....because I start missing those times when I was a player... that's what I tell my players several times.. our own concern as players is to do a good training session, make an effort to give our best, and have fun with what we are doing.

Charlotte commented that she could never have imagined being a coach in the past, but also that she ultimately realized that remaining in sport as a coach was more satisfactory and fulfilling than leaving sport entirely. However, her decision to become a coach did not seem to be driven by intrinsic motivation, but instead a desire to avoid disengaging from her athletic career:

I remember when I ended my career, I used to say 'what I like to do is to be a player [pause] I cannot imagine myself on the other side as a coach, 'but with years and maturity, I grew up, and the only thing I did not want was to leave football completely.

Beliefs that Being an Athlete is Uniquely Fulfilling

Becoming a coach was one way the women were able to hold on to their athletic identities. However, the women attributed a different meaning to the role of an athlete and the role of a coach and gave preference to being an athlete. As Sue said, after becoming a coach she:

...missed the adrenaline of playing and of the training sessions.

Moreover, they commented on how the level of responsibility changed after becoming a coach and that as athletes, the women felt they had a unique

opportunity to have more enjoyment and express themselves emotionally:

When you become a coach, you start having a lot of responsibility. I used to say that when I went to the training sessions, I forgot about everything, all my concerns.

The pre-game routines like being in the changing room and preparing for a match were also aspects of the sport that helped them feel present in their lives. The sport and the activities which surrounded the sport and winning the game brought the women a sense of complex emotions and they were afraid to stop feeling them. Sue stated:

I used to say that when I went to the training sessions, I forgot about everything... all my concerns... I only wanted to live the present... and to have an activity that makes us forget about everything... to be on the changing room, preparing for the match... all that pressure before the match... to enjoy the match... wanting and doing everything to win... all those emotions... I was afraid of stopping to feel them... So, it was hard.

The ex-athletes communicated that, as coaches, they felt that they were needed for their team to be successful, but the role of being an athlete made them feel they were physically and emotionally healthier. For example, Charlotte described how playing football was a way to cope with major life crises in the present and the long-term:

I could have any type of problems... once I get into the field, I forgot everything. For instance, as a player I had a bad moment... my mum was diagnosed with a brain tumor and only lasted 6 months... and the only time in the day I did not think about it was when I played. Football was the only thing that made me keep faith... and some-times I regret the time I spent training and did not spend with my mum. But at the same time, it was due to football that I managed to find strength to deal with the situation.

Social Pressure to Continue in Elite Sport

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The influence of social agents, such as family members and friends, was made apparent throughout the interviews in the form of trying to keep athletes engaged with elite sport, even years after retirement. After being questioned about the social support received when deciding to transition into retirement, Sue said:

People used to tell me that I could play a bit more...and sometimes I felt like coming back... (...) the obstacle was that one... my own fight to leave and all the external pressure that tried to keep me playing...the big obstacle was the fight with myself...”.

Similarly, Mary said:

...hmmm, when you give up there is always someone trying to persuade you to come back...nowadays there are still people trying to do it! But overall, I think everyone supported my decision...of course, there are always people telling you ‘Perhaps you could play one more year!’.

DISCUSSION

Disengaging from a completed athletic career implies no longer investing time and cognitive and behavioral resources in the goal of competing in elite sport. When ex-athletes stop investing in the unattainable goal of continuing their career, and start re-engaging in new life goals, the disengagement and adjustment processes are complete (Heckhausen et al., 2010). The present study shows that even several years after retirement, four female ex-athletes still recalled and dealt with many barriers that made it hard to fully disengage from their career goal. Four emergent themes in interviews indicated that these barriers reflect emotional, social, motivational, and behavioral factors.

The women reported a fear of being forgotten, stemming from an apparent loss of social recognition attributed to the brief nature of a sports career. This suggests that participants were struggling to disengage because of the fear of losing their athlete identity. Athlete identity is commonly defined as the extent to which an individual identifies with their role as an athlete (Brewer et al., 1993). Past research has indicated that ex-athletes who rank high in athlete

identity and fail to develop alternative types of identity experience greater difficulty adjusting to life transitions, such as retirement, which in turn is linked to higher levels of stress and anxiety (Lavallee et al., 1997).

Previous studies have indicated that a key factor affecting adjustment to retirement is degree of choice (Lavallee & Robinson, 2007). However, in the present study, degree of choice seemed to be influenced by the support of the athletes’ social networks, with both family and friends encouraging athletes to remain engaged with their athlete careers. As social support is known to be crucial for an adaptive transition to retirement – it is important psychologically and financially (Dimoula et al., 2013) - disengaging from the athlete career became easier when athletes received social support (Park et al., 2013). Social support has been found to have a synergy effect with positive affect (Park et al., 2018) and improve self-management processes in athletes’ lives post-sport (Wendling & Sagas, 2020). Nevertheless, other studies have indicated that not all athletes get the level of social support they need (Lally, 2007). Considering that family constitutes a central resource, the lack of support for disengagement during the transition to retirement can compromise the athletes’ adaptation in the long term. Furthermore, prior research has demonstrated that receiving social support helps in maintaining a sustained identity and boosting self-esteem (Thoits, 2011). In this sense, our study suggests that the nature of psychological support provided after the retirement period can make it harder for athletes to move forward and disengage from their athletic careers. Disengagement seems to be difficult for members of the athletes’ social network who previously served as sources of support during their athlete careers. This finding implies that sports psychologists should focus on the social network during the latter stages of the athlete’s career, thereby helping to make the disengagement process more adaptive for the athletes. Collaboration with sports organizations is also crucial to allow athletes to make a smoother career transition (López de Subijan, 2020). Also, sports psychologists could help promote exercise programs for ex-athletes that allow them to maintain social contact and a healthy lifestyle (Jordana et al., 2022; Torregrossa et al., 2019).

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These findings also suggest that the process of disengaging from a completed athletic career is demanding and complex for ex-athletes in the long term. Participants tried to compensate for this disengagement by seeking new employment within the same field. However, they did not find it as fulfilling as being a player. This suggests that redefining their athlete identity was a hard task, as the experience of being a player was uniquely fulfilling. This, in turn, appeared to have a negative impact on mental health, even a several years after retirement. Only a small number of studies have addressed adaptation to retirement and its impact on mental health (Gouttebauge et al., 2015), with most of these studies focused on the period immediately after the retirement transition. A study conducted with athletes two months after retirement showed that the athletes experienced feelings of loss and emptiness, as well as fear of losing their social status five months after retirement (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Stephan et al., 2003). Past research has suggested that adjustment is influenced by the recovery of a sense of control over a new lifestyle, as ex-athletes seemed to be able to shift their skills from sports to other domains (Stephan et al., 2003). Nonetheless, our study indicates that this transition of skills does not universally satisfy all ex-athletes and doesn't ensure full adjustment in the long term. A notable difference of our study to that of Stephan et al. (2003) is that our study includes participants that retired due to an injury or age depletion, whereas the sample of Stephan et al., (2003) only included participants who retired voluntarily. This suggests that long-term adjustment to retirement seems to be influenced by the reason for retirement.

As with all studies, the present study has limitations that must be acknowledged. For example, we used a retrospective interview methodology to explore barriers to career disengagement after the women had already been retired for several years. Therefore, participants may have had difficulty recalling details of specific experiences that could have provided depth to the analysis. Furthermore, past studies showed that the type of sport (i.e., individual vs. collective) also seemed to have an influence on the quality of retirement transition, with team sport athletes showing a better adaptation (de Subijana et al., 2020). Therefore, we recommend caution in

generalizing our conclusions to ex-athletes of different sports.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of the present qualitative study was to focus on female ex-athletes, specifically exploring the factors that can influence their self-regulation after retirement. The study shows that, even several years after retirement, four female ex-athletes continued to recall and deal with various barriers that hindered complete disengagement from their career goal. These barriers could be classed as emotional, social, motivational, and behavioral factors. A major implication of this study is that it supports the need for athletes approaching retirement to receive supportive interventions aimed at helping them reframe the meaning of retirement and to identify new life goals that could be equally fulfilling in terms of identity transition. Currently, this practice does not seem to be commonplace. For example, in a study involving German ex-female football players, 90% of participants reported the need for psychotherapeutic support at the end of their career, but only one-quarter of those received it (Prinz et al., 2016). Such psychotherapeutic support could help the disengagement process and potentially have a positive impact on mental health, as after retiring athletes with more plans presented lower depression rates (Prinz et al., 2016). Also, future studies with a longitudinal design should try to capture the different transition stages across the years after retirement to aid the development of tailored interventions.

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